



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2004

Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa under apartheid: a longitudinal analysis

Widmer, Thomas ; Hirschi, Christian

Abstract: Mainly as a follow-up to public debate about Switzerland's role in World War II, interest in Swiss relations with South Africa's apartheid regime (1948–1994) was revived during the late 1990s. In response to this public attention, in May 2000 the Federal Council commissioned the Swiss National Science Foundation to carry out a National Research Program (NRP 42+) on Swiss-South African relations during the apartheid era. A recently concluded research project at the CIS was part of the NRP 42+ and investigated the Swiss Government's foreign policy toward apartheid South Africa in a longitudinal analysis. The study showed that the steadfastness of this policy can mainly be explained by the fact that various bureaucratic, political, economic, and social circles exhibited high convergence in their opposition to economic sanctions against the apartheid regime – albeit for different reasons.

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-163054>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Widmer, Thomas; Hirschi, Christian (2004). Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa under apartheid: a longitudinal analysis. *CIS News*, 9:13-14.

Swiss Foreign Policy Toward South Africa Under Apartheid – A Longitudinal Analysis

Mainly as a follow-up to public debate about Switzerland's role in World War II, interest in Swiss relations with South Africa's apartheid regime (1948–1994) was revived during the late 1990s. In response to this public attention, in May 2000 the Federal Council commissioned the Swiss National Science Foundation to carry out a National Research Program (NRP 42+) on Swiss-South African relations during the apartheid era. A recently concluded research project at the CIS was part of the NRP 42+ and investigated the Swiss Government's foreign policy toward apartheid South Africa in a longitudinal analysis. The study showed that the steadfastness of this policy can mainly be explained by the fact that various bureaucratic, political, economic, and social circles exhibited high convergence in their opposition to economic sanctions against the apartheid regime – albeit for different reasons.

The research project was carried out by the Research Unit on Policy Analysis & Evaluation of the Department of Political Science at the University of Zurich. The project investigated Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa, starting with Switzerland's participation at the United Nations' 1968 Human Rights Conference and ending with the abolition of apartheid and the first free democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. The main research questions addressed how Swiss policy toward South Africa was designed and how observed patterns of consistency and change in the policy design can be explained. Policy design, as it is understood here, refers not only to policy content but also to the processes in the political system that generate a given policy. The study focused on political ideas and convictions and thus sought to explain the impact of attitudes, values and problem perception patterns of political actors on policy design. This orientation motivated the decision to apply the "Advocacy Coalition Framework" developed by Paul A. Sabatier and Hank C.

Smith as an analytic framework. Using this framework, two basic principles ("policy core beliefs" according to the Advocacy Coalition Framework) that decisively influenced Swiss foreign policy toward South Africa throughout the entire period studied were identified: condemnation of the apartheid system in moral terms and rejection of economic sanctions as a matter of principle.

Until the mid-1980s, the policy of moral condemnation was based on a Swiss declaration at the UN Human Rights Conference of 1968 that denounced apartheid as contradictory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the context of Switzerland's normally very reserved stance on the international stage at the time, the declaration of 1968 was formulated in an astonishingly sharp manner. But the UN Human Rights conference in general and the Swiss declaration in particular attracted little attention at home in Switzerland. Still, the "moral condemnation" of apartheid that constituted the centerpiece of this declaration would provide the basis for the Federal Council's policy on this issue throughout the 1970s and 1980s, both at international conferences and in its responses to parliamentary initiatives and public protest against Switzerland's official policy on South Africa.

The rejection of economic sanctions, the second pillar of Swiss policy toward the apartheid regime, was consistent from the outset of international discussions on the issue in the 1970s. Justification for the Swiss position was based on three main arguments:

- 1) Switzerland's established practice of not participating in sanctions imposed by individual states or groups of states,
- 2) the conviction that sanctions are not an appropriate means to bring about political change, and
- 3) the observation that, even if sanctions

actually work, they often punish the wrong party.

The Federal Council made these points in September 1986 in response to several parliamentary interventions on the topic, many of which highlighted the fact that most Western countries had adopted sanctions against South Africa by this point. The declaration of 1986 made the contrast between Switzerland's policy and the emphasis of other Western states on tangible measures even more distinct, even though the states resorting to sanctions applied them above all to sectors where they expected only minor or no negative consequences for their own economies.

Both of these core beliefs were supported by a broad coalition spanning the Federal Council, the federal administration, the parliamentary majority, center-right parties, and business circles. They even remained consistent at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Swiss Federal Council approved the export of sixty Pilatus PC-7 aircrafts to South Africa, despite the fact that the UN sanctions committee spoke of a breach of the UN weapons embargo of 1977. In response, the Federal Council and the parliamentary majority contended that the PC-7 did not amount to war material and was therefore not covered by Switzerland's 1963 weapons embargo against South Africa.

Once again, this discussion was characterized by the typical array of opponents and supporters of sanctions: on the one hand, a broad coalition from the Federal Council, the parliamentary majority, center-right parties, and business circles were committed to safeguarding free trade and individual responsibility to the greatest extent possible. On the other, a political minority drawn from left-wing parties and the peace movement demanded stronger regulation of international trade and greater solidarity from Swiss foreign policy. Indeed, an increasingly politicized and culturally

► continued on page 14

► from page 13

important anti-apartheid movement had meanwhile taken root in Switzerland. However, it never achieved the political strength in parliament or vis-à-vis the federal administration that it needed to bring about change on this issue.

Economic sanctions were soundly rejected within the very heterogeneous majority coalition, though in part for very different reasons. Although the majority coalition at times concentrated on traditional concerns of free trade and commerce and the need to refrain from interfering with the “invisible hand” of the market, pragmatic arguments emphasizing the ineffectiveness of sanctions tended to outweigh ideological reasoning. A further argument to reject sanctions was based on a deductive derivation from the principles of neutrality and universality that traditionally characterize Swiss foreign policy. Finally, on the extreme political right, racist sympathy for the apartheid system was certainly also a factor. These various convictions partly complemented each other and were also present in combination among certain individuals and organizations.

The Federal Council first introduced a significant change in the Swiss position toward economic sanctions in 1990 when it imposed its first comprehensive economic embargo against Iraq and Kuwait – i.e., when Switzerland still rejected economic sanctions against South Africa as a matter of principle. It is indeed difficult to compare these very different cases. Binding UN sanctions were never imposed against South Africa – in contrast to Iraq in August 1990 – with the exception of the weapons embargo of 1977. In the South African case, modification of the tried-and-true policy remained out of the question at the beginning of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that very different forces were at work in the case of the Swiss decision to impose sanctions against Iraq: The breach of international

law in the Iraq case was undisputed. The legal verdict in the South African case, on the other hand, was less clear-cut, and the human-rights violations of the apartheid regime had long been regarded as a South African “domestic matter.”

Moreover, Swiss economic interests in Iraq and Kuwait were marginal at the time of Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait, whereas established business relationships between Switzerland and South Africa were strong enough to mobilize businesses and sectors that viewed the prospect of sanctions as a direct threat.

Furthermore, the sudden international crisis in Iraq during 1990 simplified a reformulation of policy on the sanctions issue in Switzerland. Switzerland perceived no such crisis situation involving South Africa that would have facilitated a similarly dramatic policy reversal.

Finally, generational factors, particularly within the diplomatic corps, played an important role due to the timing and relative urgency of both decisions. Whereas Swiss officials were under pressure to respond quickly to Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait, which happened to coincide with a Swiss holiday period when most senior civil servants were absent, established actors with firmly set attitudes steered the design of Switzerland’s policy toward South Africa.

The project was based on an analysis of documents from various Swiss federal departments from 1967 to 1994, supplemented by 22 guideline-based interviews with former and current Swiss diplomats, representatives of the federal administration, Parliament, and scholars. During the end phase of the project, research efforts were complicated by the Swiss Federal Council’s decision of 16 April 2003 to restrict access to archive files (due to the threat of class-action lawsuits against nine

Swiss companies – including Novartis, Nestlé, the UBS and Credit Suisse – in the United States by victims of the former South African regime). Minutes of meetings of the parliamentary committees on foreign policy were available for the research team as was the archive of the Swiss Anti-Apartheid Movement. The full research report (in German) will be published shortly. A journal article is also in preparation. ■

Contact

For more information please write to:

Dr. Thomas Widmer
thow@pwi.unizh.ch

Christian Hirschi
chirschi@ku.edu

CISNews is published twice a year by the Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS). For a free subscription, please send a fax or e-mail message.

Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS) Zurich
ETH-Zentrum SEI
8092 Zurich / Switzerland

Fax +41 (0)1 632 19 41,
e-mail: cispostmaster@sipo.gess.ethz.ch
<http://www.cis.ethz.ch/>

Executive Editor
Prof. Hanspeter Kriesi

Editing + Layout
Yvonne Rosteck

Printing
Fotorotar AG, Zurich

© 2004, Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS)